ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

GENE S. WILLIAMS

JANUARY 7, 2003

WALL, SOUTH DAKOTA

INTERVIEWED BY ERIN POGANY

ORAL HISTORY #2003-3
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MINUTEMAN MISSILE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

Gene S. Williams is a native of South Dakota. He grew up east of Wall, South Dakota on a ranch. In the early 1960's the federal government procured a section of land on his parent's ranch to place a missile silo. Over thirty years later, when the 44th Strategic Missile Wing was slated for deactivation, Mr. Williams re-formed and led the Missile Area Landowner's Association. His lobbying efforts helped ensure that landowner's would have the first option in buying back their former property. At present, Mr. Williams still operates the family ranch.

EDITORIAL NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Minuteman Missile National Historic Site. The interviewer, or in some cases another qualified stall-member, reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. The corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewer have been incorporated into this final transcript. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 14th edition. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

RESTRICTION

INFORMANT: Gene S. Williams
INTERVIEWER: Erin Pogany
DATE: 7 January 2003

[Beginning of side one, tape one]
[Interview begins]

ERIN POGANY: This is Erin Pogany with Mead & Hunt in Madison, Wisconsin interviewing Gene Williams at his home in South Dakota on January 7, 2003. Will you please state your full name and your age?

GENE S. WILLIAMS: Gene S. Williams, my age is forty years.

POGANY: Okay. Could you describe for us your earliest recollections of the Cold War and the Minuteman missile program.

WILLIAMS: My first recollection of the Minuteman program was probably that my mom and dad left me with my grandmother for a couple of days while they went off for a court proceeding. And the court proceeding was about that my folks were suing the government about the fact that they put the missile site in the middle of our field and there was . . . the government had taken the site by eminent domain, of course I didn't understand all of these things at the time. But they were involved in a legal action and to my recollection the court found in their favor and granted them more than what had originally been allocated as far as for the loss or damages caused by the site being put in the middle of the field. That was my earliest recollection of anything to do with the missile sites was that mom and dad had to be gone to court because of a missile site legal action.

POGANY: And how old were you there at that time?

WILLIAMS: I was about three.

POGANY: Wow. And maybe that story will come back into play later and we get into some of these questions. I'm just going to go through here, can you describe why the Missile Area Landowners Association was organized?

WILLIAMS: Well at the time when the sites were put in basically, you know, most of the people that were involved that were going to have sites located on their property were patriotic people and were fresh from World War II, it wasn't that long before. I mean, we're looking at like 1960, '61, '62 is when these were being put in place and most of them had, you know, wanted to do what was right for the country, but the way that the Air Force or the Corps of Engineers came in and said that this is what's going to happen to you, you have no recourse, you're going to have this site put where we say it's going to be. Landowners started to realize that maybe they needed to kind of band together

and form some type of organization to be able to have a little bit more clout and also to gain some political exposure and to bring the Senators and Congressman for South Dakota in to make sure that they weren't ran roughshod over.

POGANY: So if you had to state a mission, their original mission, of the organization what would you say that mission was?

WILLIAMS: To make sure that the rights and the property rights and the civil rights of the landowners that were being asked to host Minuteman II sites were adequately represented. I don't think it was designed to extract a pound of flesh from the government it was just more or less to make sure that the government didn't over exert because of "Cold War Crisis" didn't fall into some type of a mandate that they could just do whatever they wanted to. That's one of the things, the entire of the Cold War was that you were fighting Communism, that is that the state dictated to everyone and yet our own government at times falls all over itself and falls into the same trap that it's supposedly defending us from.

POGANY: Do you recall you or do you know who the founding members of the organization were?

WILLIAMS: As I said, Leonel Jensen was one of the movers and shakers within that organization. There were several others that I . . . initially the Missile Area Landowners Association the group that existed in the sixties I'm not that familiar with who all was involved with that. It just happened that when the time came for the missile sites to be deactivated we found that there had been a Missile Area Landowners Association in the past and that was the name we took just out of some type of coherence with what had gone before.

POGANY: So technically speaking it was a totally different group?

WILLIAMS: That's right.

POGANY: That's interesting. Could you explain were there, you kind of dabbled with this a little bit earlier, but was there a series of events that led to the original group organizing do you know?

WILLIAMS: I'm not sure exactly what, you know, how that came to play. I think, as I mentioned earlier, the history that Paul Jensen had written up that his father had been involved in I think that probably gives a pretty adequate description of what went on. Also the Rapid City Journal had some old clippings and what not. I guess when we got involved with the thing it was more or less to try and do some of the same things as far as making sure that whatever happened as a result of the deactivation was not going to cause long term damage to the property rights or also cause civil problems for the people that were, had been hosts to these sites for the last thirty years.

POGANY: I was unaware before that this was basically two different organizations, so if some of my questions are slated as if it's one thing, you know.

WILLIAMS: That's fine.

POGANY: And we'll get back to your current . . .

WILLIAMS: One of the things that I think probably was a failure on behalf of the landowners in the area and as well as the Air Force, is that you had a lot of friction when the sites were originally put in place. A lot of that friction had been overcome through a variety of, you know, mitigations and different things that had occurred. But after the people that had been through that moved on, especially with the Air Force, the people that moved on that had had to put up with some of the problems and the vibrations and what not that had went on. When they moved on there really wasn't any kind of an outreach that was kept in place with the landowners. And one of the hopes that I have of this entire site, you know, the National Historic Site and what not, is that for other types of weapon systems or not just weapon systems but basically any type of a public facility that is sited on private land or in conjunction with private land anywhere in the United States that does have some type of time period where it maybe, you know, sunset or whatever that the government and the landowners or the people that are involved with that keep in contact with each other and don't allow there to become a wall of silence that then you have to go through these, you know, heart wrenching communiques that the people that are in the government or in this case in the Air Force. It causes a great deal of heartburn for them because all of a sudden you've got landowners that are upset about something that you have no understanding about. And then on the landowners side we should've done a better job of keeping abreast of what was going on so that we could have made some suggestions to the Air Force or the military when they were going through the process of doing the START negotiations. There could have been some leeway all the way along so that some of the problems and some of the extra costs that were borne by all of as taxpayers could have been minimized. And I guess that's one of the things that I wanted to be involved with this progressed about was to hopefully bring that to light.

POGANY: All right. You mentioned earlier that your father was involved. Was he then, a member of the early Missile Area Landowners Association?

WILLIAMS: He was . . . the membership of that group was basically anybody that went to the meetings and signed up. I don't think there was any really hard and fast dues structure or anything like that. Actually as far as when he was involved in the litigation with the Corps of Engineers and the Air Force about compensation for the site, that was done by himself. I think there were two or three other landowners that also had to go to court as well because they felt

that they hadn't been compensated fairly. And I guess it's one of those things, I don't . . . my dad was not somebody that ever got too upset and wanted to sue people about things very quickly. But I think the thing that irritated him the most was at the time that they were talking about where this missile site had to be located and they decided to put it right in the middle of our wheat field up north here. And they brought out a bunch of colonels and majors and what not from the Corps of Engineers in Omaha and one of them told my mom basically said, you know you're not being very patriotic about this. And that kind of rubbed her the wrong way considering that she lost a brother in World War II and that probably was the straw that broke the camel's back about, you know, we're fed up with this. So my dad explained it best he said, you know, if somebody has a nice house in Rapid City and somebody came in and said, well your house is worth $30,000 and there's 3,000 square feet in the house and we're going to just cut a two foot square out of the middle of your living room and we'll pay, you know, a prorated based on the house is worth $30,000 that doesn't take into consideration that you're going to have to walk around that hole for the rest of your life. And that was more or less the feeling on why they were ready to sue about where the site was put. He'd offered to donate the ground to the Air Force if they would put it in the corner or just basically just put it anywhere but in the exact dead center of the field. And the other thing that irritated a lot of people was that the government had a lot of land out here. I mean, half a mile to the north is U.S. Forest Service. Two miles to the south or actually a mile to the south is Badlands National Park. I mean there's thousands upon thousands of acreage of government now.

POGANY: Getting back to where we were, so did they end up constructing on your father's property?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it's the, the site's right up here in the middle of the field and it's one of those things . . . it's really hard to explain to people unless they've ran farm machinery or anything, but I figured it's probably taken a month out of my life just in extra time working out corners. Because a missile site out in the middle of a field where if you could just go straight back and forth you don't have corners. But by putting that missile site out there there's four extra corners in two fields that you have to work out every time you work in that field. If you work the field say three or four times a year and say over thirty years time it's a little bit extra hassle.

POGANY: So did your father, was he compensated?

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes. They were, I don't remember exactly what the fee was but I think it was at the time $1,500 or something like that was the number.

POGANY: Fifteen hundred in total?

WILLIAMS: Total.

POGANY: Oh.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, you wouldn't, you wouldn't, the lawyer fee, $1,500 wouldn't even pay the lawyer fee now, but lawyers used to be reasonable at one time.

POGANY: It really puts it into perspective.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

POGANY: It was interesting that you talked about patriotism, that was one of my questions. What role do you think American patriotism played in the early organizations willingness or unwillingness to assist in the Defense Department quickly, you know, putting in or choosing sites?

WILLIAMS: Well I think that the Defense Department picked South Dakota for a number of reasons. One is that they saw that there was a great deal of patriotism. I think Tom Brokaw stated that in the greatest generation and I think South Dakota had more per capita participation in World War II than any other state. They recognized that, they also recognized that there was an adequate supply of electricity which was necessary. You had a small population here which was also necessary, I think, to make them . . . to be able to spread them out to the extent that the needed to to make them a tougher target to hit. Those were all factors and also the fact that as far as a flight plan straight over the Pole. I mean, there were a lot of reasons, but patriotism played a role obviously.

POGANY: We talked a little bit about the landowners involvement, can you give a round about number about in the early sixties, do you know from your father talking about it, how many landowners were involved in the organization?

WILLIAMS: Well see there's 150 sites throughout western South Dakota, but a lot of people don't recognize that there also is all of this cable running everywhere and in a lot of respects that was probably a bigger headache for some people than having a missile site. Because, well one of the things when they were putting cable in and stuff they were cutting fences had cows getting out. You know, it's just one of those things where you have people that are not familiar with livestock that are in charge of putting something in and they're on a deadline, they're getting chewed on by three or four dozen people, they're in a hurry trying to get done what they're supposed to be getting done. They leave holes open, cows fall into holes all kinds of things like that happened. And that probably, there probably were more people upset about the cable installation than the actual people that were affected the missile sites being put on their property.

POGANY: Do you have any, you mentioned cows falling into these holes, are there any other stories like that of people's anger that you've heard over the years?

WILLIAMS: Well, I guess, yeah. Where they'd open pits up to like put a junction box in or something and had left it for an extended period of time and a cow fell in and it was out in the pasture where somebody didn't check it for two or three days and they lost cattle. And, you know, where the trench lines had gone in to begin with for the first few years when those settle they're just a hazard as far as being on horseback and what not and there were that, you know, were injured when they were riding across or something and hit one of those. Probably no more so than what happens with, you know, sink holes or other things that naturally occur but when somebody has put it on you, you know, of course there's going to be if that they wouldn't have done that this wouldn't have happened. Well that's just the way it is so.

POGANY: Do you know if there were any other groups in the early sixties that were involved or worked along side with the landowners association?

WILLIAMS: No I don't know. Like I say I was about two years old at the time and the only thing I have to go by are, you know, any of the records that have been passed on to me or any of the things that I've looked at in the papers and stuff.

POGANY: We talked about your father a little. Just for the record can you give us his name?

WILLIAMS: My dad's name was Gene E. Williams that's why the S. is important in mine.

POGANY: I see, I see. Do you know, did any of the landowners from your research, do you know, use the organization for their own agenda?

WILLIAMS: No. Most of the landowners that were, I think, involved with it, you know, that had came back, a lot of them had been veterans of World War II, and some of them were extremely well organized. They knew how to get things done. They had contacts with people that could get things done and, you know, they were very adept at bringing a lot of pressure to bear on the Air Force quickly, I think. And I think it's unfair to call it the Air Force because from my recollection and listening to dad, you know, it's one of those things another one of the early memories was that my dad wasn't somebody that really cursed or swore very much, but he would have nightmares occasionally where he'd be sitting in his chair and all of sudden there'd be all the blinkity blank Corps of Engineers. You know I never understood what the Corps of Engineers was or anything and what were those words mom, just never mind that's . . . but it was something that really, really frustrated him and, you know, I think that was probably some of the reason that when the time came for us, for the deactivation to occur, one of the reasons that I got involved was that I felt like that there had been some things that had been shoved down people's throats that maybe if they would have gotten involved a little bit quicker they wouldn't had to have been quite as distasteful.

POGANY: Do you know if from your father if there were any peace organizations that tried to use the landowners association to meet their own agenda or anything?

WILLIAMS: No I'm not aware of any of those, but the "peace movement" really didn't start until, you know, the late sixties. I actually have some friends, you know, that I've met in later life that were involved with some of the sit ins and what not. And as a kid growing in the late seventies and stuff when these people came out and did these sit ins we kind of all thought they were a bunch of Fruit Loops really. Because, you know, I don't know what, you know, I guess I wasn't as versed in civil disobedience as maybe I am now, but, you know, more power to Ghandi, but I think it was kind of a joke.

POGANY: I missed my one question here, would it be fair to say that from you speaking about the organization that there really wasn't any dissent between members, you know, arguments about their goals or aims?

WILLIAMS: Well I think there were times probably when, like with most organizations, as soon as somebody is able to achieve the goals that they were attempting to accomplish then their interest in the organization usually wanes. And the Air Force, the Corps of Engineers, whoever you want to call it, they were masters in the art of divide and conquer. I mean, okay, if you can meet the demands of the majority which primarily the main questions or the problems that were occurring were with the cable installation and, you know, after you've already laid nine-tenths of it you throw a bone to those people that are still upset and, you know, they're going to go away or else they're going to say well I've already had it done to me there isn't much I can do. And so then it just kind of loses enthusiasm and the organization starts to just take a back seat. And like I say I think that's one of the things that probably was a mistake was that people didn't stay a little bit more, I don't know, you know, having a meeting every week and all that kind of stuff is necessary. But I do think it's important for groups that have a common agenda to, you know, at least kind of touch base with one another occasionally so that they, you know, if there are problems or things that aren't being taken care of that they all hear the same story rather than, you know, letting the rumor mill run rampant. And the same goes for the Air Force. I think they could have probably solved a lot of problems if they would have just kept up with some type of continuous PR but that's one of the things that the various public relations officers that I got to work with in the early nineties, they were just completely at a loss trying to find all of the adjacent landowners to these sites. You know, people change over a period of time, there was no database of who was whom. Those types of things should have probably been kept up.

POGANY: What do you feel the general, from speaking to your father over the years and living here for your entire life, what do you feel the general public feeling was towards having these missiles nearby when they were first being constructed?

WILLIAMS: Well when they first were being constructed, you know, I think there were a lot of people that looked at them as jobs. It was very good to the local economy. There were high paying jobs, there were a lot of people that had an opportunity to work on the missile sites that, you know, that was probably as good a paying job as you couldn't have gotten anywhere at the time. There were people that picked up skills associated with working on them that have used them the rest of their life. I have a friend that his dad actually was one of the electrical line crew people, might be a good person for you guys to talk to.

POGANY: Maybe we can get his name afterwards. Sure we'd love to.

WILLIAMS: But the other thing there was some apprehension, of course. You know, the duck and cover and all this stuff. It's hard to fathom I guess now having lived with, you know, knowing what nuclear weapons can do and stuff, you know, all of your life, but it's hard to understand that you had gone from . . . a lot of the people that were having these sites put on their place had settled in this area in horse and buggy. I mean, they . . . the trains had brought them here, they had first been on their property ridden out to it or went out to it on a wagon, settled and now you're putting a hole in the ground for a missile that could launch and go, you know, 15,000 miles and blow up millions of people. I mean, those types of things I think were hard for people to even put their arms around. In perspective it was quite an undertaking that these things were occurring.

POGANY: And as in more recent years before they were deactivated when you were going to school here was there any thought . . . did people even give them a second thought that they were here?

WILLIAMS: After a while, you know, it was just one of those things. I guess when I talked about farming around, when you've spent the better part of the day pretty close to it looking at it, yeah then there was a complete feeling, you know, awe and also it was an ominous awe because you recognized that . . . one of the things that you learn early on a farm is anything that can go wrong will go wrong. And here you're sitting with thermonuclear device that's a half a mile away from your house and you know well somebody punches the wrong signal code in or turns the wrong key the thing could go boom and you're just vapor. And, you know, you don't want to dwell on that too much, but you also recognize that, you know, it wasn't just the enemy that was going to blow you up you could blow yourselves up.

POGANY: In the back of your mind so that was always there growing up, that's interesting. It's my understanding that there was something called Community Days where people were allowed to visit the facilities and you were fairly, you were young then so did they have Community Days as you were getting older and did you attend?

WILLIAMS: The Community Days, the ones that they usually had in this . . . now is interesting as far as I'm concerned that the site up here at Exit 127 to the best of my recollection I don't think they ever had a Community Day there. They had one out at the one by South Creek which is north of Kadoka and I can remember a couple of times where they had, because I had some friends in high school or grade school that lived out there and they went over to see. And it's like geez I've lived next to a missile site my whole life and I've never seen what's, you know, the inner workings and what not so.

POGANY: Did you ever attend Community Days?

WILLIAMS: No, no.

POGANY: Did your friends and what did they tell you about it?

WILLIAMS: Oh they just talked about the bomb, the stuff in the basement, basically, you know, a lot of computer circuitry looking boards and different things like that. My dad when they were putting the sites in one of the . . . you weren't supposed to allow civilians on site or whatever, but quite often there would be Air Force personnel that, you know, they figured well you probably weren't a security risk since you're going to be living next to it your entire life or something. I know dad had gotten to go and look like what they had for a generator setup and the fuel tanks and that kind of stuff. And that always amazed him, I mean he just was fascinated by the amount of electrical generation capacity that they had there and then some of the different working mechanisms that were involved in it.

POGANY: So what do you think the relationship was between the landowners and the military at the missile site once they were constructed and activated?

WILLIAMS: Well I think for the most part probably pretty . . . the people that were actually the staff, the people that were sent out to, you know, do the maintenance and, you know, just basically security detail and the different things like that, they were usually a bunch of fresh faced kids sent to they thought the middle of God's forsaken half acre or something, you know, similar to what your impression of South Dakota was, out in the middle of nowhere. If you're sitting up here, now not all days are sixty degrees like this. If it's twenty below out and the wind is blowing sixty miles an hour and you're sitting up here in some little Jeep thing that's covered with vinyl, you know, quite often I think people that were passersby they often would stop and check to make sure that they weren't broke down or, you know, if they weren't freezing to death. There's good eggs and bad eggs in any group and, you know, occasionally you'd have some people that were mad at the world that they'd been stationed out here and they sometimes acted like jerks, but there are people that live here that are mad at the world and sometimes they act like jerks too, so.

POGANY: So over the years did your parents interact with the men working at the sites?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, you know, it's one of those things I think we all recognize that they had a job to do and you didn't want to cause them to be put in a compromised situation, but at the same time, I mean, if it was . . . I know a couple of times when it was a hundred degrees and there were boys that were stationed up there and my mom took iced tea up to them because they didn't have enough, they only had a canteen and it was too hot for anybody to be out. I suppose now they would have gotten into great trouble because they could have been drugged or something but, you know, that was just the way it was, so.

POGANY: They must of been very appreciative.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

POGANY: So how would you describe what you think the working conditions were for those working there?

WILLIAMS: You mean as far as, you know, on detail after they were established?

POGANY: Right.

WILLIAMS: I think that it's like anything else where you're working outside in western South Dakota, there were probably some days that were just absolutely wonderful and then there were a lot days that were terrible. If you have something that breaks done when it's like, I say, twenty below and the winds blowing it's probably pretty miserable conditions, but for the most part I think there are probably a lot worse details they could've be on.

POGANY: Going back a little bit, do you think that the community had different relationship with the officers as compared to the enlisted men or enlisted individuals?

WILLIAMS: Oh really the officers for the most part did not interact very often with the local community. I mean, that was one of the things that, you know, they're in a position of authority and consequently their primary interaction with the community would have been the Rapid City area would not have been locally. To some extent that may have been another thing that, you know, if they would have just, I think if Ellsworth would have done a little bit better job of, you know, possibly doing some PR interacting with the local communities when the time came to deactivate and some of the other things that were going on it might have been easier for the Air Force to have gone ahead with whatever they were trying to accomplish. It's just, you know, it's hard to work with people that you've never seen and that isn't a government fault just with the Air Force. That's a government fault with most levels of government. It seems

like the higher up you get the more insulated you become from the general public and actually that's the time when it would really help you to have more interaction with the general public so that you have an understanding of what's going on and also that they put a face with the people are helping to take care of you.

POGANY: Do you know from chatting with your father about how decisions were made on where they were going to place silos?

WILLIAMS: Well they said that there was a, you know, that was the thing that always rankled my mom especially. Her name was Saxon, Saxon Williams. And that was one of the things that really irritated her because they said that the missile site had to be in the middle of our field, but when the guys were coming out to flag it they'd been stuck in every neighbor's pasture within about three miles of here. Now if it had to be exactly there then why couldn't they find where it had to be, that was her contention. Now I understand that you could get lost that's not that big of a deal but it seemed a little ironic that it had to be in this particular location, but they couldn't find that particular location.

POGANY: Do you know how they came . . . why it was your ranch and so and so's ranch, why it was the exact locations of each of the missiles and launch facilities?

WILLIAMS: The way that the Air Force has explained it to me is that they had to be a certain distance away from each other in order to meet their requirements. From what I can see by looking at different sites around the country it looks to me like that they tried to put them on a level site fairly close to the road, fairly close to electrical lines, you know, for ease of access, obviously. But there were . . . I know of a couple of other people that well Granville Cook was one, actually it was Ohmer Cook was his brother up here by Cottonwood, Omar passed away several years ago, but his was another site that had to be in a certain location and then he'd called Senator Case and he knew Senator Case and I think probably donated to Senator Case and the site moved. It's amazing, you know, the things that have to be that don't have to be if you know the right people.

POGANY: So then you see that politics influence the decisions?

WILLIAMS: Well, I don't think that base closing or anything like that ever has anything to do with politics. I'm saying that as sarcastically as I possibly can. Politics plays a role in anything. If you don't understand that you should live somewhere else.

POGANY: Describe what you think what kind of affect the Landowners Association had on where the missiles were placed if any.

WILLIAMS: By the time they actually got involved to the point I think most of the sites had already been sited. I don't think they really played much of a role at all in

determining where they got put. The people that had the contacts or felt that they, you know, could exert some type of pressure had already done so and, you know, by the time Missile Area Landowners Association was up and running or it was, you know, kind of an after the fact. It's like most things you have a problem and then you form a group a group well by the time the group gets formed the problem is about half over.

POGANY: We talked a little bit before, you said your father received $1,500 as compensation and you explained that the . . . there was basically not a final agreement between the organization and the government it was more on a person to person?

WILLIAMS: Right. That would be, as far as going back through the records, I mean, there was quite a discrepancy between, you know, what some people were paid and others were paid. And it basically amounts to Corps of Engineers, you know, got it for as cheap as they possibly could from everybody. And in some respects I think there were some people that felt that, you know, almost looked at it like well you're not very patriotic if you're going to try to get more money out of it. In my experience it looked to me like the ones that felt that way usually were having it put in the middle of a pasture or something that wasn't . . . if it got stuck in the middle of some hard pan ground versus being stuck in the middle of the field, you know, it's to say, well I'm patriotic I'll just let them have that. Well it's what the cost is to you.

POGANY: So as the son of someone who was affected by this in the sixties what would you have liked to see done differently then?

WILLIAMS: Well I wished that they would have, as far as the siting, like with ours it was probably an isolated case. There probably were only fifteen out of the one hundred and fifty that ended up being put in the middle of crop land, but if they could have minimized the amount of impact that occurred that would have made it a lot more palatable to the landowners. I was in Montana about a month ago and they have Minuteman II sites up there and I was amazed, I saw one that was on basically an extremely steep sloped hill and I thought, you know, they obviously were able to put it there which looked like it minimized the amount of impact that it probably had on that producer. They probably could have done the same elsewhere if they would have wanted to.

POGANY: Could you describe how the business of ranching was conducted around the missile silos and launch facilities?

WILLIAMS: I guess the main thing was that you had to make sure that stayed back far enough so that you didn't set off any alarms and different things like that. After the fences and everything were up as far as cows rubbing up against the chain link fence and that didn't seem to cause any problem so. There were some people that played pranks. That's another person you should probably

interview is, there's a neighbor over east here that I think the Air Force chased him down at one time. They had thrown a raccoon into the missile site and set off the radar.

POGANY: What was his name? Can we say that?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, Justin Wheeler.

POGANY: Oh, that's funny.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he's probably got an interesting story or two to tell you about those.

POGANY: Were there any special provisions that needed to be made for movement of animals or people or?

WILLIAMS: Not that I'm aware of. Maybe when they were right in the process of putting them in place there may have been some type of a time period there that you were not supposed to be anywhere close to them or something like that, but as far as I know. One of the things, probably one of the biggest headaches that was involved with these sites after they were in place was that the Air Force periodically did come out and check them with their helicopters and I don't know if you're . . . if anybody is familiar with freshly weaned calves, I mean, they basically are about like scared kitties and if you have a helicopter fly over your corrals when you've got a couple hundred head of freshly weaned calves you'll find out just how many fences you can fix in short order. And it wasn't intended to, you know, cause although I'm not so sure I think there may have been at time there may have been pilots that did derive a certain amount of glee from being able to make things run or something. But that was probably one of the things that was a nuisance as much as anything.

POGANY: I bet the younger children liked to see the helicopters you don't see that much?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, a helicopter flying over your house that was quite a big deal.

POGANY: What do you feel were the benefits in maybe disadvantages as to having the silos located nearby?

WILLIAMS: Well there were a lot of benefits. I don't know if a lot of people recognize a lot of the benefits that did come about as a result of those being in this area, but obviously the fact that we had a missile laying in Rapid City contributed greatly to the fact that we have a regional center here. I mean so many of the things that Rapid City boasts for a city the size of 50,000 people are directly a result of the fact that we had a large number of people that were stationed here to work on the missile sites. It helped the area to grow from that respect. The area out here the various county roads that lead into these missile sites they received a tremendous amount of extra money for gravel and

maintenance which was. When you're looking at infrastructure and there's a limited number of people to pay for infrastructure anything that helps to enhance that is a wonderful thing. Electricity, the capacity that we had in this area the amount of electricity that each one of those sites took greatly increased the amount line that was put in and basically infrastructure that exists today we had it thirty years ago. So when they phased them out we had a lot of the positive things as far as electrical lines and everything were already in place so there wasn't a need to build back up. I mean, we've obviously been over the last thirty years a lot more electricity is being used but there's excess capacity when the missile sites left. And then you had a lot of the crewmen and stuff that learned to love the area and there are a lot of people that have retired and are living in western South Dakota or if not living here they come back as tourists, vacation here, tell their friends about it. When you talk about positive benefits from tourism people that have been out here and have experienced a starlit night on the South Dakota prairie or has seen a fantastic sunset in the winter months those are things that you can't put into a tourism brochure and if they tell their friends about it it's something that's beneficial to the state.

POGANY: So set aside the taking of land or purchasing of land do you think there were any disadvantages?

WILLIAMS: Well I guess the biggest disadvantage is the fact that we put something in place that had a life expectancy of "thirty years" but it was obsolete by the time it was deployed. Most of the people that are weapons experts will tell you that really almost by the time that they were . . .

[Beginning of side two, tape one]

WILLIAMS: . . . and then one of the other big disadvantages I would say is that I think we wasted a lot of money in the manner in which they were deployed, maintained and also deactivated. And maybe that can't be helped, but if no one every recognizes that maybe things could be done better it's hard to ever to decide to do them better. One of the things I guess that was interesting and somewhat amusing and also frustrating, is that they had put new radar systems in these missile sites oh about seven or eight years prior to when they deactivated them. They'd spent I don't know how many millions of dollars to put these new radar systems for interior security within the site within the missile site perimeter fence, but when they put those in place somebody had miscalculated them and when you ran the beam it hit against the south side of the fence and set the monitor off. So basically this new security feature that they had put in place wouldn't work. Well that's not a big problem when you're the government, you just come out and cut the fence, extend it out another twenty feet, you know, it looks, you go up there and look at this missile site, I mean, it's a tacked together woven wire extension that looks like. And then probably three years after you did this expensive revision or whatever then you decide to

deactivate them completely. It's like well, okay, I guess things change and everything, but good grief you could have saved probably ten, fifteen million dollars. Maybe I'm high on the number, but I can't imagine the government ever doing something that doesn't cost ten or fifteen million dollars. When there are so many other programs that are dying for dollars and you just flush that amount of money on something that didn't need to be done is kind of frustrating.

POGANY: Now we'll talk a little bit about what your role has been in the past ten years with the Landowners Association. So if you can give me a little introduction of how you personally became involved in the organization.

WILLIAMS: Well I guess the way that I first became involved, as I had mentioned earlier, we . . . the way in which the sites were put in place thirty years previously was kind of a heartburn subject. One of the things that my dad was upset about was that when they had put the site out here they went down a hundred feet and set off depth charges to determine whether or not the soil was stable or whether or not it was a good spot for a siting. Well about that time all of the shallow wells in this area dried up and that caused us to end up drilling a deep well that in 1966 it was about $10,000 to drill a deep well. And without that we basically didn't have a source of palatable water here for the place. And so consequently when they were talking about imploding these sites, blowing them up, I was kind of concerned, well is there any chance that this could cause a problem for the well that we have existing or any other structures that are in the area. I'm not a seismologist so I don't know exactly how much, you know, shock wave and all this kind of things. And I was also concerned about, you know, we knew we had a problem with some sterilant run off that had been used on the site to control weeds within inside the site and the drainage off of the site went out into our field and we had a dead spot out there and that was another, if you have a minute or two we can talk about that. The sterilant site was another interesting deal. One of the . . . we had this dead spot in our field and I had contacted the Air Force about this dead spot I said, there's obviously something coming off of your site, I don't know what it is, I really don't care what it is as long as it's not something that's going be hazardous chemical, but I do care that I've got X number of acres out here that I can't grow anything on and I'd like to fix that can we do something about it. Well then the JAG Corps they called, well do you have a claim? I said, no I don't have a claim I just have a problem here I want to fix this and my idea is that we've got some fill dirt that we've cleaned out of our corrals if we could just take that up and spread it over this area that's dead and kind of work it in, mix it in, probably would make it so that it would grow again. Well, we're not authorized to do that kind of stuff but we'll get back to you. In the meantime Bob Eben who was the cable affairs officer up at Ellsworth, I ran into him one day and I said, you know, all I want to do is I'd just like to fix this, if you guys are going to be down in this area some time with, you know, a couple of trucks and a blade and a pay loader. He said, well we've got all that stuff down at

Delta-01 in a couple of weeks. I said, why don't you just come down, if you can schedule it, and I'll show you what I want done and everything will be fine. And he said, well, yeah, I think we can do that. So a couple of weeks go by and they show up and we spend about a half an afternoon leveling the stuff out, mixing it in, it's not perfect but it's way better than it was and it accomplished what I wanted to get done. JAG Corps calls back about, oh, a week later and they said, have you decided what to do with your claim? And I said, I never had a claim. Well, we're proceeding as though that you do and we're willing to offer you $1,500 to settle your claim. And I said, well I don't want to settle the claim and besides they've already fixed what I wanted. Who fixed it? And I said, well the Air Force. Who authorized that? And I said, I don't know who authorized it all I know is they did what I wanted them to do, it's fixed I have no problem with it. And they're like, well we'll have to send out a memo or some type of document for you to sign that relinquishes your claim. I said, I didn't have a claim. Well, we're going to send you something that says that you no longer have a claim. I said, fine whatever you need to do. So they sent it out I signed off on it and it's fine. But a prime example if they just would have allowed the people that were closest with the problem to work with it, but no it always has to be somebody out of Washington D.C. that is involved with it. Well anyway, back to the rest of the story. So having already known that there were some chemicals and different things going on there, I also wanted to make sure that if any type of stuff was left in the hole that the Air Force would take responsibility that if later on it becomes a hazardous waste site that they will be responsible for cleaning it up. I also wanted to make sure that whatever they were planning on doing here that you weren't going to end up with some other type of a . . . well, for instance a hazardous waste disposal site or something being put there. So they'd had a scoping document that they'd sent out as part of the NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] process asking for opinions. Well their scoping meetings had been held in Rapid City and I think that the only one that they held in this area was in Rapid City and I'd got a copy of the scoping document and there were like three people that had attended the scoping meeting and none of them were landowners. And so I had written down some different things that were of concern to me and had sent them in for their draft EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) and then had sent back what their conclusions were that basically I was all wet and didn't know what I was talking about and that trust us we're the government and everything's fine. And at that point is was like, okay, I guess I've done what I can do. Well, I get a call from a Wenzel Kovarik who lives north of New Underwood and he had some of the same concerns and he hadn't gotten a scoping document, he hadn't participated in EIS, he said, do you think it's too late for us to do anything? I said, well I don't know. He said, well why don't we hold a public meeting in Wall and see if there are other people that feel the same way that some of these . . . one of his concerns was that the cable easements not become a rails-to-trails type deal where you have every Tom, Dick and Harry being able to ride across your place because the cable easements have been turned over to the, you know, some biking group

or whatever. I said, yeah, I suppose, I'll see what I can do. I called Dave Maschoff who was the news reporter for KBHV radio station out of Sturgis. They put it on the air that anybody that was interested in, that had questions about what was going on with the deactivation in the Minuteman II sites that they could attend this meeting. I might not have all of my dates exactly straight, but there was a lady from, she was a freelance writer from the San Francisco Chronicle that had happened by shortly after our meeting and she did an article about, you know, that we were concerned about the wells and didn't really touch on a lot of the other concerns. The people that were clear up like in the Red Owl country the main thing they were concerned about is what's going to happen to that gravel because they're in a gravel deficit area up there, it's a long ways to haul gravel up there. They wanted that for their roads. And then the other thing was it looked like it was going to be a boondoggle of magnificent propositions. There were a lot of people that were interested if we could save the actual missile sites themselves whether you could use those as . . . put a plastic bladder in them or something for water storage. I had one guy that had figured out it would hold about 80,000 gallons of water which considering to buy or to build something that would hold that much water is pretty expensive and if you had storage capacity like that that obviously would be valuable. Other people were interested in possibly using them for silos, for grain silos or different types of things like that. So basically the interest was, there was a large amount of interest on a variety of issues but the lady that wrote this article for the San Francisco Chronicle primarily touched upon the water issue and that seemed to strike a nerve. We had this first meeting and decided that maybe we should have another meeting. The Air Force at the time wasn't really, they're like us not too important, we're not too concerned. Well a Peter Kilborn from the New York Times came out and attended this next one and wrote an article in the New York Times. Well if it's in the New York Times it's news. And then within a couple of weeks we had ABC Nightly News was out here. CBS Evening News and the Today Show were all out here within a month. All of sudden then the politicians they thought well yeah, this obviously something that, anything that gives you publicity and there might be someway that we can jump into the fray we'll get involved with. Anyway all of those things escalated and the Air Force did start, you know, becoming more involved. The poor guys up at Ellsworth themselves like I say Kevin K_____ and Joe Magerick [sp?] was his name were the public affairs officers, good people. But the big deal with all of that was that they were basically trying to explain to their brass higher up, you know, these people aren't out for blood they just want to make sure that their interests are taken care and that, you know, if there's anyway that we can make some of these things more palatable and more usable and we can save the government money that's what they're trying to accomplish. Well, the brass, of course, thinks that somebody's trying poop in their next and they tell them just to quash it. I had an interesting conversation with a deputy assistant secretary of state who more or less told me that I didn't know anything about treaties and never would know anything about treaties and as I pointed out to him the treaty that he negotiated with

the former Soviet Union no longer was the former Soviet Union and we were in the process of negotiating with four separate states now that we were going to have to give them the money to be able to accomplish the things that they were being held to by this treaty. It sure looked to me like we that had an opportunity, maybe, to cut some deals for ourselves if we were going to give $100 million to the Ukraine we should be able to maybe give some gravel to the guys around Red Owl. But anyway all of that's just extra fodder.

POGANY: Those are the interesting stories that you don't generally get to hear unless we sit down like this. So I mean if you know anything feel free to share. So generally the efforts of the organization in the 1990's wasn't just to help area ranchers get land back it was all kinds of different agendas?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, there were a whole bunch of different things that were important the landowners, I think. The easements, obviously, we wanted to make sure that the easements were not something that was going to be transferred to someone else. That the adjacent landowners would have the first right of refusal on the property when it was finally deactivated. That any type of hazardous waste material that was still on site was going to be the responsibility of the United States Air Force to take care of if down we find that a material that we thought was plum fine at this point in time is now a terrible carcinogen we wanted to make sure that they would be responsible for the clean up. We wanted to make sure that the way that the sites were left was hopefully as, you know, usable as possible or whatever is defined by the treaty. In a perfect world each site, each person would have liked to have been involved with how, what was going to happen to their site. A perfect world doesn't exist so consequently you're dealing with 150 sites, actually what is there down at, is it Whiteman in Missouri, I think, there's another hundred and fifty down there. Everything had to be the same for all of them under the contracts that were let. That's just the way it is, but I think for the most part the water situation we were able to get the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to come in and do monitoring as far as, you know, well flows and stuff that were within, I don't remember if this is right, I think it was within a half a mile of the actual site. If you had a well that was within one-half mile of the actual site that was going to be imploded they did flow measurements prior to the implosion and after and they also took readings as far as, you know, baseline readings what type of contaminants or the purity of the water so that if there hadn't been any type of a lateral transmission of any type of heavy metals or anything like that. Just common sense things that you would think that, you know, and by and large I would give the Air Force credit after it finally sunk in that we weren't trying to screw the government that we were just concerned about, you know, our homes, you know, which a ranch is is your home, for the most part they were pretty good to work with. There were some, like I say, there were some brass higher ups in the Air Force and also the State Department that basically were completely appalled that anybody would ever question their integrity or their motives. We weren't questioning

their integrity it's just that they never gave us a second thought even though we were the people at ground zero so to speak, you know, it's something to happen to you and you're a peasant and go on and get out of our way. Well, that's not the way America works. Everybody has a right to complain and try to change things if they want to.

POGANY: So I'm curious, did they get their gravel for their roads as part of the…?

WILLIAMS: Well, they're going to be able to get the gravel I guess after the sites go back into their hands. It had all been bladed up into a pile and so it was all basically just stockpiled in a pile on each one of the sites, but it had to be bladed all back out and so we have, I call it the contract where they destroyed these or imploded them or deactivated whatever you wanted to call it, $185,000 per site for a lovely gravel parking lot in the middle of nowhere. But it's all bladed, I mean, the finished grading, I mean, the guys that were running those blades there were A number one, they did a tremendous job of laying that down.

POGANY: Could you speak a little bit to the process or maybe clarify, I think there's some confusion as to whether originally the government leased, bought or took land and what the process was. Did everyone get their land back?

WILLIAMS: Initially, basically the Corps of Engineers came out and they said we will give you so much for your ground. If you said, yes, they acquired it for whatever you, whatever they told you they were going to buy it for. If you said no then they exercised the right of eminent domain. There were some people that after it went through the process of eminent domain they still felt that they had not been compensated adequately and then they took it to court and either they were successful or unsuccessful in getting a judgment at that point in time. But the land was all purchased. Now the cable easements those were just assigned, I mean, that's just . . . there was one guy that I've read some documents that he was paid so much per foot for the cable easements and that's the only one I know of and that was Ingebert Fauske who was a neighbor right up here to the north and he's passed away, his wife just died yesterday. But that's the only person I know of that was compensated for cable. There may have been others but to my knowledge he's the only one that was. I mean he made out like a bandit, I think he got like a buck or a buck and a half a foot for, yeah, I mean there were several miles of cable put on his place.

POGANY: So what were the efforts to return land to original owners or how did that work?

WILLIAMS: The way that, well one of the things that was of a great concern when this was all going through the process was that the general accounting office was going to be the distributor of the ground. And if it goes through the J.O. process, you know, it's declared surplus and anybody could bid on it. Well

when they were acquiring it, and this is another one of those things where, you know, documentation, documentation, documentation, the landowners were told that if ever was, you know, if it ever was to come back they would have first right at it, but they didn't get in writing anywhere that I can find. And that was one of the things that was very important that we made sure that when they were deactivated that you had, that the adjacent landowner, wherever the adjacent landowner was, would have first right of refusal for an appraised value. And, you know, even that's still kind of a pie in the sky because you don't know what you're come in at appraised value, but from my understanding and talking with the realty office and talking with the people that have had the sites they said it's basically going for what an acre of ground in your, on your property would cost. So I think they've tried to do, you know, live by what they intent or what they more or less said they would, you know, thirty years ago. I think that's a good thing, but that may not have happened if we wouldn't have kind of held their feet to the fire as well.

POGANY: And what happened with the facility that was on your father's property?

WILLIAMS: It hasn't gone through the realty thing yet. I talked to them, I talked to the realty office here a couple of weeks ago and I think it sounds like it's probably going to be October of this year. They're turning them back in the order in which they were deactivated and that would probably, ours would probably be in October.

POGANY: Is the property around there still in your family then?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

POGANY: So what exactly was the typical work that undertook on behalf of this organization in the '90's? Were you more of like an organizer of others?

WILLIAMS: More or less probably a lobbyist. I worked with the Congressional delegation, with their staff, State DNR through the Governor's Office, the various medias. Talked to, did quite a few interviews with various organizations through the media. From all of those things, I guess, it was a tremendous learning experience because the one thing that I thought going in was, geez if we could just get somebody to hear what we're talking about they'll understand that we're trying to save people money and that, you know, this is something about trying to stick it to the government you're actually trying to make something that is, we've spent a bunch of money on, have it be usable, have an extended life period to it, save our country money and also more or less make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. And the media by in large they loved the story because it pitted big against little, good against evil and I think unfairly I think a lot of the Air Force especially the public relations people up at Ellsworth I think they were, you know, characterized as being bad guys or whatever and they were just people doing their job. And I guess from the standpoint I guess the media was

doing their job. Their job is to sell news time and the story that sold was big against little, water is the issue. They didn't cover, you know, a three minute news piece on the nightly news you don't have time to go into all these other issues. And I guess that's one of the things that I hope that will kind of be covered through the historic site is that there are a lot of other issues that go into putting something in place and also taking it out of place. It isn't just a one time shot, it's something that's going to affect the area forever and anything we can do to mitigate those negative affects and enhance the positive affects those are the things that we should all be trying to aim for.

POGANY: That was one of my last questions, but I'll get to it right now. What exactly you would like to see come out of the establishment of the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site?

WILLIAMS: I think the idea of this site, Irv Mortenson was the park superintendent at the time when I was going through a lot of these things and he and I and Teddy Hustead and Teddy Hustead's grandpa, Ted Hustead were all in Toastmasters together at the time, and Irv and I would drive together to Wall to go to Toastmasters and talk about all of these various issues and Irv's son, he would go home and talk to his son about it and his son said, you know wouldn't it be great if we could turn that into some type of a historic site. And Irv took the ball and kind of ran with it. There are so many good things about the Cold War, the fact that we were able to basically show the better part of humanity and not kill each other over thirty years when we basically had a gun to each other's head. I think that speaks volumes about the possibilities and the positive things about humans as a whole. But then there are also, you know, the fact is that we did have a gun to each other's head for thirty head and that speaks volumes about the downside as well. And all of those things are, I think, important stories to tell. The other thing I guess, the main thing that I would like to have come out of it is that there were people that hosted these sites for thirty years that were kind of the forgotten soldiers. Granted we weren't the people with our fingers on the trigger, but we were people that knew that we had a missile in our backyard everyday and, you know, that's something that the rest of the country probably never gave a second thought to.

POGANY: Right. Going back just one moment here, is your organization still alive?

WILLIAMS: No, one of the things that the Missile Area Landowners Association when we had collected dues about the time that was necessary, I went to Washington D.C. and met with our Congressional delegation and some of the Air Force higher ups and what not, the, some of the secretaries of state, it wasn't the secretary himself but with some of the staff. Anyway we had collected dues from the membership at that time to basically forgo some of the expenses and we charged $50 a member and that wasn't all of the people that had attended the meetings initially. We asked for a buck from everybody when we, just to

cover postage and stuff, but we had a big number of people that threw in $50 to offset some of the costs. I think we ended up using about, it figured out to be about $20 or $25 a person and it seemed like everything was pretty much winding down and so what we did is we just refunded everybody the remainder of their thing. We hadn't really formerly chartered or anything that, but that's . . .

POGANY: How many individuals joined, do you know?

WILLIAMS: She's got it in the thing, I think it was like, it seems to me like we had about, oh I think it was about, it must have been about fifty because we had about $2,500 I think is what it was.

POGANY: So if you can just clarify, there was nothing really that went on between like early sixties and early nineties with the organization?

WILLIAMS: Not that I'm aware of.

POGANY: No, okay. Let's see what else here, so personally speaking, how successful do you think the organization was when they were trying to reach goals in the early sixties and when they were reaching goals in the early nineties?

WILLIAMS: I think both groups probably were successful to some extent. They would have been more successful if they could have gotten involved with things a little bit earlier. The START treaty itself would have been nice to have known that some of these things were being, and I've talked to different . . . one of the things that was fascinating about all of this is that the people that come out of the woodwork to contact you. In one, oh one of the nightly news shows had been on one night and I get a phone call about ten o'clock that night from a retired CIA person in Virginia wanting to tell me that everything that we suspected about what was going on was absolutely true and that you should be careful about this, this, this, and this. Well would you be willing? No I can't give you my name. It's like, well thanks a lot, you know.

POGANY: Interesting though. It really gives a human side to everyone and some people don't realize that there's two sides to the fence, you know.

WILLIAMS: Like I say, the Air Force, we're extremely lucky in this country that we have the military, the people in the military that we do have. I mean we have by far the finest military force in the world, but I am also very thankful that we have all of the checks and balances that we have that allows civilians to at times call to question some of the things that are going on within the military. And as long as we recognize that you have a duty to not just go along, but also to question at times I think our country's in great shape. But the minute you just blindly assume because somebody in a military uniform tells you to do something that that's in your best interest I think we're headed down the wrong way.

POGANY: Well I finished my questions, do you think that we missed here or any other stories you'd like to share with us?

WILLIAMS: I just want to make sure I give you some of those names. Don Poss is somebody that, I can even give you the phone numbers here. One other story that is of interest was that at the time they were putting the sites in place my sister was working for Boeing out in California and the company had a company newsletter, not newsletter it was a company magazine and they sent a photographer and a writer out to interview dad because, you know, that was one of those things, you know, she's working on some stuff well they're shipping this stuff to South Dakota. Yeah they're putting a missile site in my dad's field. Well that's what this stuff is, you know. And the irony of it or the connectiveness I guess and they did kind of an interesting story and I think that would be something to try and track down is that Boeing article.

POGANY: You don't have a copy and your sister?

WILLIAMS: I don't know if, I doubt if she has a copy of it either. She's moved a million times in the last thirty years. But the Library of Congress, I'm sure would have something like that. I have a picture that I'd like to show you too.

POGANY: Well while you're looking up there I'm going to go ahead and shutdown here and I just want to go on the record saying thank you for your time. We greatly appreciate it.

WILLIAMS: You're welcome.

[End of interview]